No. 41

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

She bore her trials in exemplary patience, and she was too proud to allow her enemies to know her pain. But her tears often flowed freely when she was alone.

R. of M. G., No. 41.

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Cincinnati, Ohio.

THE gossips and scandal mongers would have an opportunity to wag their tongues as they never wagged them before. The whole world would know that Philip Gordon had been living with a woman who never legally was his wife. And he would never survive the disgrace.

Marie could not brand her former husband with such an infamy.

However, in all her agony of soul there was at least the satisfaction of knowing beyond the faintest shadow of doubt that Phil still loved her, and that he had never given his heart to Alice.

During the long night hours Marie sobbed and prayed alternately. Once, driven by an irresistible impulse, she rose from her chair and touched Phil's lips with her own.

It sent a thrill through her entire frame, and she quickly retreated, her cheeks aflame.

"Still my husband," she breathed softly. "Still my husband in the sight of heaven, although in the eyes of the world he belongs to another."

As the early morning hours began to dawn and the first ray of sunshine streamed into the window, Gordon seemed to grow more quiet. He was breathing deeply and at regular intervals.

At the foot of the bed knelt Marie, her head bowed and her hands foldeed.

"Give me strength, dear God," she was praying. "Give me strength so that I may bear this terrible cross. For myself I ask nothing else. But, please, spare the father of my children."

In this position Victor Talbot found her as he opened the door and looked in. Marie heard him and rose to her feet.

There was puzzled expression on his face as he

inquired in a whisper:

"How is Mr. Gordon this morning?"

"I think he has taken a turn for the better," she replied. "See how quietly he is sleeping. Don't you think that is a good sign, Mr. Talbot?"

"Just what the doctor ordered," the latter said with an audible sigh of relief. "Now you better come down and have some breakfast. Mrs. Ruggles, my housekeeper, will come up and watch in your place."

Marie smiled her acquiescence. She cast a longing glance in the direction of the bed, then she followed Talbot from the room.

Chapter 133

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

ALICE GORDON was far too shrewd to follow her inclination after leaving Oak Manor. She knew well enough that she could not afford to take any more chances without incurring the vehement disapproval of the friends she valued so highly.

She knew that she must behave if she did not want to become an absolute outcast from all decent and desirable society.

But there was another, and a more powerful deterrent.

Already in bad with her father, she feared that he would disinherit her if she continued along the obviously crooked path. And yet, she had no intention of giving up Harold Wayne.

She went to Chicago and secluded herself in one of the best hotels. When she left Oak Manor, she had not the least intention of visiting Grace Marshall, an old schoolmate friend.

Indeed, nothing was farther from her mind.

In the first place, Miss Marshall had recently moved to Denver, Colorado. In the second place Miss Marshall was of old Puritan stock, and had the reputation of being strict in her morals.

Alice realized the utter impossibility of finding the right kind of companionship with Grace Mershall, for they were as unlike as day and night.

What Alice needed now was a confidential and a trustworthy friend to whom she could tell her many

troubles without being reproached.

What she needed and sought was someone who would sympathize with her —— someone who might condone her glaring faults.

But the main reason why she decided not to stray too far from Oak Manor was her keen desire to keep in touch with developments there.

She figured coldly that her father could not live much longer, and she wanted to be close enough to personally take charge of the Procter estate as soon as the end came.

So far as her husband was concerned, Alice concluded not to give him another thought. He was not worth it. Her dream of a happy life with Phil Gordon had proven a hideous nightmare.

And she was not sorry.

It was only when she contemplated the probability of him marrying the beautiful governess of his two children if she left him for good, that she felt a pang of fierce jealousy.

Alice hated this Marie Desmond with the most virulent vindictiveness. It was a hatred which made her turn cold all over at times.

Hers was the hatred born of guilt and the very bitter realization how far Miss Desmond stood above her in a moral sense. Ah, if she only might be able to drag this governess down to her level. Nothing could have pleased her more.

It was the second day after Alice's arrival in Chicago that she quite unexpectedly met an old friend in the person of Mrs. Hendricks.

This woman, who played quite a part in the beginning of this story, had been an occasional visitor at Oak Manor.

But during the last months she had remained a-

way because of the cold reception accorded her by Pl. Gordon. Phil's keen dislike for Mrs. Hendricks dated back to the days when he was still so happy with his first wife.

He had always felt that most of his domestic troubles might have been averted if Mrs. Hendricks had not undertaken —— with malicious intent, to sow discord between him and Marie.

How well this society butterfly succeeded, need not be dwelled upon again.

It was this same Mrs. Hendricks who first sowed the seed of suspicion and jealousy in Marie's heart the night they went to the dance at the fashionable Madison Country Club.

Alice and Mrs. Hendricks had remained close friends because birds of a reather will always flock together. It is an old saying, but nevertheless a very true one. They were two of a kind.

They both believed in getting every bit of pleasure that could be had out of life. They both were none too scrupulous in their dealings with other women, and men too, for that matter.

So when these two met quite accidentally in a State Street department store, the surprise was only mutual.

"Hello, there, dearie," Mrs. Hendriks greeted. "I am glad to see you."

"I am glad to see you," Alice retorted, but her smile was a little twisted. "Spending your money as usual, eh? Well, I am spending some myself." After a moment she added soberly:"Don't you find it stuffy in here,my dear?"

"Yes, very stuffy," Mrs. Hendricks agreed, looking her friend over with a little more than ordinary curiosity. "You look as though you were in need of some

fresh air, Alice. What is the matter? Did you just get out of a sickbed?"

"No!" came back gruffly.

"Quarreled with your husband?"

"Worse than that," Alice answered. "I have left him —— left him for good."

"Left him for good?" Mrs. Hendricks almost shouted in her boundless amazement. "Good gracious, dearie, what made you do that?"

Alice did not care to air her troubles while standing at a counter in the department store, for she noticed that several of the saleswomen were staring at her and Mrs. Hendricks.

"I am staying at the Hotel Blackstone," she said to the latter. "Suppose you come with me and I will tell you all about it."

Mrs. Hendricks did not need a second invitation. She was all expectation.

"Let's go," she smiled.

They walked from the store arm in arm. At the curb Alice hailed a taxi, and in less than fifteen minutes they were at the hotel.

As soon as they were seated in her room, the discarded Mrs. Philip Gordon plunged into her story. She spoke about her many disappointments with a great deal of feeling.

But her eyes glinted dangerously when she related the various incidents involving Marie Desmond, the lovely governess.

"It was just one hell of a life!" she cried, using the profane word vehemently. "The day that woman came into the house, I became a second-hander. Oh, I suppose my husband fell for her alright.

"She is as beautiful as any woman I ever saw. I'll be fair enough to admit that. But she is not as sweet and

innocent as she pretents to be. Believe me, she has been through the mill and knows her alphabet."

And then Alice told of her meeting with Harold Wayne. She frankly admitted that this handsome young man had fascinated her.

"He was everything to me what Phil chould have been," she said in defense of herself. "He was always kind and considerate. He knew what to say and when to say it. He seemed to read every wish in my eyes. Well, you can guess the rest."

Mrs. Hendricks indeed guessed the rest.

There was a peculiar smile on her face as she nodded. She was an adept at reading cases like this. She understood them very well.

"Yes, I can imagine," she said. "You ran off with this Harold Wayne and —— "

"You are wrong there," Alice corrected. "Before we could agree upon that at our last meeting, my dear husband took it into his head to look for me. Well, he found Harold and I together in the pavillion.

"I had the fright of my life. For a moment I thought murder would be done. It was some little scene. Harold Wayne attempted to stand his ground. But I was glad when he left before Phil killed him. In the end my dear husband invited me to leave his house. And not wishing to remain, I left."

Mrs. Hendricks was smiling again. It was a knowing smile. There was much she would liked to have said, many questions she would have liked to ask. But Mrs. Hendricks was at times a tactful woman.

"So you are living in this hotel and burying yourself, Alice," she remarked with a short laugh. "In other words you are atoning in solitude in sackcloth and the well-known ashes."

Alice shook her head.

"Not very long," she declared. "I have written to Harold Wayne and asked him to come. What happens after that, I can't tell, but I don't care very much. Of course, I'll have to be careful."

"Yes, women like us must be careful," Mrs. Hendricks said reflectively. "But tell me something more about this Harold Wayne. Where is he from, and just what kind of a man is he?"

The description Mrs. Gordon gave of her lover was somewhat flattering, and the other woman listened with rapt attention.

Alice finished by saying that she was not at all sure that Wayne would come to her in response to the letter she had written to him.

"Don't you worry about that," Mrs. Hendricks told her. "He'll come quick enough when he finds out that you are safe."

Alice glanced sharply at the speaker.

"Just what do you mean by that?" she demanded in a slightly raised voice.

"Why ask foolish questions," came back serenely. "You know well enough what I mean. Since you left your husband's home you are free to do as you choose. There is no longer any danger of being spied upon and caught.

"I dare say, your friend Harold Wayne showed an unlimited amount of nerve to make love to you under your husband's very nose. I rather like him for it. I admire a man with daring."

Alice glanced at her companion dubiously.

"Now listen," Mrs. Hendricks went on. "I want you to come and stay with me. In fact I insist upon it. I have plenty room in my house, and —— "

"But your husband might object when he learns that Phil and I have separated," Mrs. Gordon inter-

rupted. "Don't you think so?"

Mrs. Hendricks shook her head.

"My husband is never home long enough to object to anything I do," was the prompt response. "As the representative of a New York bonding house he travels a great deal. Sometimes I don't see him for a whole month. So you don't have to worry about him. And I shall enjoy having you, Alice."

"Would you, really, Louise?" the other asked.

"Indeed, I would." Then Mrs. Hendricks added meaningly: "There would be no objection to Harold Wayne meeting you in my home. You see, I am away quite a few evenings."

Alice blushed and held out her hand.

"Very well," she exclaimed. "I will accept your invitation. When do you want me to come?"

"Right away, Alice. Pay your hotel bill and have your things taken to my house. I am having a little party to-night, and you'll fit in nicely. If you can reach Mr. Wayne by phone, ask to come also."

The suggestion appealed to Alice.

She experienced some difficulty in making connection with the Wayne estate. It seemed the line was always busy.

Finally she succeeded.

"Hello!" she cried in a high pitched voice.

"Hello," came back. It was a woman speaking. "What do you want?"

"I wish to speak to Mr. Wayne, please."

"Mr. Wayne is not at home," was the quick reply. "He has not been home for the last two days."

Alice looked her disappointment.

"Can you tell me where I could get in touch with him?" she tried again. "This is a matter of importance and I must speak to him."

"I am sorry I can't give you that information," the woman's voice at the other end of the line answered. "None of us here have the least idea where Mr. Wayne is at present. There has been some trouble here and we are pretty much upset."

"Trouble?" Mrs. Gordon gasped. "Won't you be kind enough to tell me about it?"

"Sorry I can't oblige you," came back. "I am Mr. Wayne's housekeeper, and I don't feel that I have a right to discuss any of Mr. Wayne's private affairs. You'll have to excuse me."

"But I am one of Mr. Wayne's closest friends," Alice insisted. "I am sure he would not object to anything you told me. What is the nature of the trouble, and in what way was Mr. Wayne involved?"

After a long moment of silence during which Mrs. Hendricks and Alice exchanged glances several times, the speaker at the other end said:

"Mr. Philip Gordon, our neighbor, was found shot and badly hurt. Some people around here seem to suspect that Mr. Wayne did the shooting. That is all I can tell you."

And it was more than enough.

Alice had turned ghastly white. She seemed on the verge of fainting.

"Good heavens, what is it?" Mrs. Hendriks demanded. "What's happened?"

In a voice that quivered with forcibly subdued emotion and excitement, Mrs. Gordon repeated what she heard over the telephone.

"If that is true," she added, "then God help me. I'll be in an awful mess."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Hendricks declared. "Now get a grip on yourself. You look as white as a ghost. You can't always believe a gossipy servant. I never had one

yet that could be relied upon for the truth. I'll tell you what to do.

"Give Mr. Wayne's housekeeper my home as your future address, and ask her to pass it on to Mr. Wayne as soon as she gets in touch with him. The rest will take care of itself."

Alice called the Wayne home once more. As soon as she had delivered the message to be transmitted to her lover, she breathed a deep sigh of relief and rose slowly to her feet.

"You —— you better let me stay here at the hotel," she said to her friend. "You don't want an unhappy woman on your hands. I must remain alone so I can reason this thing out."

Mrs. Hendricks objected.

"Nothing of the kind, Alice," she cried. "You are coming with me. What you need right now is some mental diversion. I'll provide that with the help of a few of my friends.

"I have a party on for to-night that will make you forget your troubles. Nothing like a good time when you are worried and feel blue. Come along and be a real sport. And unless I am much mistaken, your Harold Wayne will be one of my guests."

There was something about Mrs. Hendricks' confident smile that Alice did not like. She was not at all sure that this woman could be trusted.

But she was not in a position to be too critical and exacting. Alice knew that she could count upon a good time at Mrs. Hendriks' party. It was this prospect which swayed her decision.

But she decided to keep her eyes wide open. Mrs. Hendricks had the reputation of being a love pirate. If she took a fancy to a certain man, she usually went after him.

Alice was quite determined that this woman should not steal Harold Wayne away from her.

Mrs. Hendricks noticed that Alice was still hesitant.She had a definite motive for wanting the beautiful second Mrs. Gordon as a permanent guest. But she was too clever to betray the fact.

"You really must come with me, Alice," she urged once more. "It least give my home a trial. If you do not like it, I won't ask you to stay."

But Alice's mind had already been made up. She held out her hand and said:

"Thanks, Louise. I'll come."

Chapter 134

MRS. CRAWFORD

PHILIP GORDON lay at the home of Victor Talbot at the point of death. Quite unexpectedly complications had set in which made his recovery extremely doubtful. In addition to Dr. Brown and Dr. Van Buren, a specialist had been summoned from Chicago.

Everything known to medical science was being done to bring about a change for the better in the very dangerously wounded man.

As might have been expected, Marie insisted upon remaining with Phil Gordon as his nurse, and the many agonies she endured could not well be put in words. She suffered all the mental tortures imaginable.

"God, I ask nothing for myself, but save the life of the father of my children!" was her prayer every hour of the day and night.

Victor Talbot had relinquished the care of his estate to a competent manager, and he spent a great deal of time at the bedside of his friend.

He, too, was suffering, and his suffering was of a twofold nature.. He feared for Philip Gordon's life, and he feared that his dream of love could never come true.

There stood between him and Lillian Crawford the forbidden figure of the young girl's stepmother. He knew that this woman, whom he had scorned, would never consent to their marriage.

But it was the uncertainty that tortured him more than the possible fact. It must come to an end or

he would go mad.

Three times he had been on the verge of going to Mrs. Crawford and formally ask for Lillian's hand in marriage. But each time his courage failed him.

It was indeed not a pleasant prospect to plead for a favor with a woman who loved him, and whom he had so unqualifiedly rejected. A woman who loves a man will fight for him. She will never give him up to another.

Victor knew all this, and that is why he was so fearful of approaching Mrs. Crawford.

But one evening, as Philip Gordon appeared to be a little better, he stole away from the house and rode over to the Crawford home. He was unpleasantly surprised to find Lillian alone on the veranda and weeping softly to herself.

"Oh, Victor," she exclaimed when she saw him approach, "I am so glad you came."

He ran toward her with both arms stretched out.

"Why, what is the matter, sweetheart?" he asked tenderly. "Why are you crying?"

"Oh, my stepmother has been terribly mean to me all day," the girl sobbed. "I don't know how much longer I am going to stand it."

"Mean to you?" Victor Talbot's lips tightened. "What for?"

Lillian disengaged herself from her lover's embrace and dried her tears before she spoke.

"This morning as soon as she got up, she started scolding me for being seen with you," the girl began as she dropped wearily into a seat. "She has been nasty ever since I encouraged you, Victor. But to-day she was unbearable. She keeps on insisting that I must marry Roger Hawkins."

For a moment Talbot sat in moody silence.

It was the same old story. Lillian Crawford seemed at the mercy of her stepmother. She could not defend herself. It cut him to the very soul.

As on several occasions before, he felt again the temptation to take this sweet young girl and flee with her to the end of the world.

But it was always his honor that sternly forbid an elopement.

"I think I'll have a talk with Mrs. Crawford," he said as he rose and made a move toward the door. "I might as well ——"

"No —— no, not now!" Lillian protested. "She is in a terrible temper right at this minute, and you do not know what she is capable of. She may become very violent and order you to leave the house. Please, Victor, wait until she is in a better humor."

Talbot shook his head stubbornly.

He was unwilling to allow matters to rest as they were. There must be an end to the vile treatment accorded to the girl he loved so dearly.

"Mrs. Crawford and I have had any number of arguments, dear," he said. "We are not strangers. Far from it."

Lillian rose from her chair quickly and placing a restraining hand on her lover's arm.

Tears welled anew up in her big eyes and her sweet face was contorted with dread.

"My stepmother will never give her consent to our marriage of you approach her now," she warned. "Wait until——"

"I don't propose to wait another hour," he cut her short. "But you must not be afraid that I will quarrel with her. And if she is the woman I think her to be, she will be fair enough to give me a hearing."

Without waiting for a reply, Talbot wheeled a-

bout, opened the door and entered the house.

One of the servants directed him to the cozy living room where Mrs. Crawford sat busily engaged with some needle work. As soon as she saw Talbot come in, her features lighted up, and she ran to meet him.

"Victor!" she exclaimed. "How nice of you to call. I have been horribly lonesome. Here, take this chair and you may smoke if you like."

This greeting was about what he expected.

Mrs. Crawford was always at her best when they met. And he admitted that she was a lovable woman if her treatment of him could be taken as a criterion of her disposition.

He looked her over with a half smile and somewhat critically. There was no denying that she was an unusually handsome woman, if a trifle mature.

She had a figure many a young girl would have been proud of. Her eyes were large and dark and passionate. Her complexion, always rosy, had taken on some additional coloring.

Talbot sat down. It did not seem possible that this woman was capable of cruelty.

She had been made to love and to be loved. He blushed slightly as he encountered her inquisitive gaze.

"Well, Victor, what is on your mind?" she asked softly.

"I came to speak to you about Lillian," he answered promptly.

Mrs. Crawford's expression changed swiftly. Half of her youth was gone in an instant and she seemed years older.

"You surely are aware of the fact that Lillian and I are very fond of each other," he went on earnestly. "And it has been my hope that you would not object to our——"

The woman threw out her hand in a passionate gesture.

"Why, Lillian is scarcely more than a child," she said in a tone which betrayed her emotion. "Of course, I knew that you paid considerable attention to her. Being treated like a young lady always is pleasant to a child of her age. But I can't imagine that you two love one another."

Victor Talbot smiled ironically.

"Your imagination must be very limited, my dear Mrs. Crawford," he told her. "Lillian and I do love each other. To be sure, she is quite young, but not too young to be able to distinguish between friendship and love. I have taken the liberty to ask her to become my wife. I hope that you will not object to our marriage. I'll make her happy, indeed I will."

Mrs. Crawford looked at the speaker, unmoved, and cold now. Her face had gone rather white, but its expression was inscrutable.

"The inexperience resulting from Lillian's youth is the only reason which compels me to deny what you ask, Victor," she replied in a steady voice. "But if that is not sufficient, I regret that I must give you another, and not a very pleasant one.

"You must be aware of the great difference in social standing between you and my stepdaughter. You must not forget that Lillian is a Crawford. And a Crawford, you know, never marries below her station. I could never permit that."

There was an angry flash in Talbot's eyes as he answered:

"That is a strange speech for you to make, Mrs. Crawford. I did not expect it from you." His tone was unconsciously sarcastic. "I imagine you would be more liberal minded for, before you became Mrs. Crawford,

you were Miss Jones.

"At least that is what you called yourself," he added with a peculiar glance. "That may have been your maiden name. But if certain rumors are to be believed, your name, before you married Mr. Crawford, was Prescott—Mrs. Prescott, a divorced woman."

The woman shrugged her shoulder. For an instant a dangerous glint came into her eyes.

"Who told you that I was Mrs. Prescott?" she demanded, obviously disconcerted. "Would you mind giving me the name of the party?"

Victor Talbot shook his head.

"What for?"

"Oh, I would just like to know."

"And give you a chance to quarrel with that party?" he grinned. "No, I don't think it would be at all advisable."

"Well, who told you that story lied deliberately," Mrs. Crawford returned hotly. "I think it is a shame the way I am being talked about."

His eyes held hers for a moment.

"So far as I can see it did not make much difference whether you were Miss Jones or Mrs. Prescott before you married Mr. Crawford. We won't quarrel about that."

It was very evident that the woman was fighting hard to regain her mental composure. It was also evident that she disliked the discussion of the subject Victor Talbot had brought up.

"What I was trying to point out to you," the latter spoke again, "was, that your social rating was not very high before you married Mr. Crawford."

Mrs. Crawford pulled herself together rather quickly. However the expression in her eyes told that she had a hidden reason to be conciliatory. She did not

want to hear anything more about her past—her unsavory past.

"That may be, my dear Victor," she rejoined cooly. "But I know I was Miss Jones before I became Mrs. Crawford, and I want you to understand this: Had I been Miss Crawford, I would not have become Mrs. Jones.

"Now I am trying to convince you in a kindly way that a marriage between you and my stepdaughter is inadvisable. And even if I felt inclined to yield in the matter, there is a more weighty reason to consider.

"I am very much concerned about Lillian's future. Although I am her stepmother, I love her as if she were my own flesh and blood. I want her to marry well. And I also——"

"No man could provide better for her than I can," Victor interrupted, keeping down his rising anger. "I am not a poor man by any means. And I love her as no other man can."

Mrs. Crawford's smile had a very disagreeable element in it. She leaned slightly forward as she retorted:

"Your intentions are good, my dear boy. But there is one thing of which you probably are not aware. Lillian is no longer free to give her hand to anyone, for Mr. Hawkins already proposed to her."

"I am aware of it," Talbot returned, "for Lillian has told me. She told me also that she does not love Roger Hawkins, and she does love me."

The woman shook her head repeatedly.

"Lillian is but a child and must not be allowed to take a step that necessarily affects her whole future," she said. "Her father provided for this when he made me her guardian. I regret exceedingly that I can not grant what you ask, Victor.

"Mr. Hawkins has already received my promise that Lillian shall be his wife. As Mrs. Roger Hawkins she will have a wonderful future before her. Her position socially, will be second to no other woman in Chicago."

Victor's handsome face grew pale.

While he knew of this marriage proposal from Hawkins and its acceptance by Mrs. Crawford, he was struck by the unreasonable and contradictory attitude of Lillian's stepmother.

"I am sure," he said in a pleading tone, "you don't mean to give the girl to the man whom she doesn't love. It would be outrageous. You have no moral right to deny her the happiness that would be hers as my wife. It is my firm belief that Lillian be allowed to speak and chose for herself."

Mrs. Crawford leaned back in her chair, and, although, she had difficulty in keeping herself under control, her voice remained smooth and oily.

"Certainly," she replied, "when Lillian is more mature and has reached an age of understanding—but now, it is with me to decide."

Their eyes met like the clashing of swords.

"Is this your ultimatum, Mrs. Crawford?" asked Talbot. "Consider well—Lillian loves me and we will be faithful to each other in spite of your opposition. Why do you stand in the way of Lillian's happiness? I give you my sacred oath that her happiness will always be the first consideration with me!"

His voice rang with passionate enthusiasm.

Mrs. Crawford quivered.

What would she not have sacrificed to engender this feeling on his part for herself! But the door of this paradise was closed against her—it was open for an immature child!

No and again no! If she could not be happy with this man, Lillian should never be his wife!

"I regret I must hold to my refusal, Victor," she answered with wonderful composure, but dropped her eyes before his penetrating look. "At some time or other Lillian will thank me for having saved her from a reckless step. An heiress such as she is not born to spend her life on a lonely country estate.

"The highest circles are open to her; all the advantages of society are her due, and I consider it my duty to shape her future so that she may receive everything to which her birth entitles her."

Talbot's grave, manly face grew strained and pale. His pride was touched at its tenderest spot. Rising erect he retorted coldly and decisively:

"Very well, Mrs. Crawford, I will abide by your decision for the present. Since you oppose my happiness I must wait until Lillian has reached the age when she can control her future herself. One thing is certain, however, Lillian will be my wife! I will win her even if the whole world is against us!"

A formal bow and he left the room before Mrs. Crawford had time to answer him.

For a second she stared after his retreating figure; then the self-command which she had preserved with great effort left her.

With a cry of agony she threw herself on a couch and buried her face in her trembling hands.

In all her life she had not suffered such heart-ache. She realized only too well that the affection between the two was so strong that nothing she could do would prevent them from reaching their aim.

She was compelled to confess to herself that it was not in her power to keep the two apart.

This unripe girl had captivated a man for whom

she, the ripe woman, longed in every fibre of her passionate heart. Of what profit to her was her objection to their marriage?

Both would only love each other the more and finally be victorious. A storm of hate, resentment and pain raged in the soul of the disappointed woman.

Her trembling hands nervously tore to shreds the lace handkerchief which repeatedly she pressed to her lips to keep in check the wild impulse to shriek out her sorrow.

Before Talbot had gone many steps, Lillian, who had been waiting for him, hurried to him and threw herself impulsively in his arms.

One look in his pale, downcast face, told her that he had been unsuccessful.

"Victor, my dear, dear Victor!" she cried. "You know I can love no one but you and that I will die before I will marry anyone else."

Something like sunlight came over his grave face. Why despair? He could not be robbed of his happiness, Lillian was his for all time.

"Yes, you are right, sweetheart," he responded, "I rely upon you and will not lose courage. I only regret that for the present we are at the mercy of a woman's moods. For myself, it will be the greatest hardship for me to wait so long, when I do so pine for a home and domesticity, which I have never enjoyed.

"But you, dear, will you have the strength to brave all storms? It will not be long before they will come. Will you be steadfast and brave them?"

It was no unripe child, as Mrs. Crawford had called her step-daughter, but a woman ripened in the sunlight of love, who now fondly clung to him and answered with sweet simplicity:

"Let them do what they wish, I am yours and will

remain yours for ever and ever!"

With a jubilant cry he pressed her to his bosom; a proud light shone in his eyes and he repeated with inexpressible joy:

"Mine—mine."

Chapter 135

THE RIVALS.

VICTOR TAIBOT had changed greatly. Deep shadows dulled his usually bright eyes, and there was an expression of bitterness about his lips. It was not strange. How could he have a glad moment when he knew that Lillian, his love, was constantly in suffering?

Her step-mother was making life a veritable hell for her. Heretofore she had not given vent to her dislike, but now Mrs. Crawford indulged her jealousy and hatred.

She treated Lillian like a prisoner, and when the poor thing succeeded in eluding her step-mother and met Victor for a few short moments, it did not need her tears to tell him what she was forced to endure. But what could he do?

Lillian was under the legal guardianship of her step-mother, and could only submit to her will. Could Lillian's father have forseen such a state of affairs, he certainly would have found her another guardian.

When he was alone, Talbot's fist often doubled when he thought of the cruelty of the despotic woman. But what did it help? He could not relieve the sufferings of the poor girl one iota.

To cap the climax, at Mrs. Crawford's invitation, Hawkins became a guest at the house, and did not fail to use the opportunity to pursue Lillian with his attentions.

The fact that she plainly showed her disinclination toward him did not serve to deter him in the least

Scenes between Mrs. Crawford and Lillian were almost of daily occurrence, the former using every means to force the poor girl to accept Hawkins, but she was steadfast.

Death would have been preferable to her to becoming untrue to her love. All the strategy of her stepmother, all the efforts and labored amiability of Roger Hawkins did not shake her.

She bore her trials in exemplary patience and was too proud to allow her enemies to know her pain. But her tears often flowed freely when she was alone.

With increasing concern, Talbot observed how thin and pale Lillian's face grew under these harrowing conditions and he brooded constantly for an escape from them.

He even thought of eloping with her and being married in another state, but he realized that such a marriage would not hold, as Lillian was still a minor.

He was compelled to confess to himself that he could undertake nothing against the intriguing stepmother who stood in the way of his happiness to avenge on him and Lillian the love that he had rejected.

Mrs. Crawford did not quite give up hope of conquering his affections and not infrequently invited him to the house.

These invitations he accepted more than he had been in the habit of doing before, especially when he had reason to believe that Lillian would be one of the company.

That he should be with her on these occasions, was of course, beyond the power of Mrs. Crawford to easily hinder, although she left nothing undone to keep them apart, even at these social functions.

The short moments in which the lovers, observed by everyone, could exchange a few words, were crumbs

of comfort to them on which they often subsisted for weeks.

To society at large, it was no longer a secret that Mrs. Crawford wished to make a match between her step-daughter and Roger Hawkins, and that the former was unwilling because she was in love with Victor Talbot.

With a certain suspense, society watched the course of this romance. Lillian captivated the hearts of all with whom she came in contact.

Her own gentleness and modesty, threw into higher relief the haughtiness and pride of Mrs. Crawford who was privately looked upon as somewhat of an upstart.

The Osgoods were giving another dance, and among the invited were Mrs. Crawford and her step-daughter, Roger Hawkins and Victor Talbot. The latter had accepted because he knew he would meet Lillian there.

The room was already well filled, when Talbot's fine figure appeared on the threshold. Mrs. Crawford was the first to see him and her dark eyes glowed with passion.

He was certainly a handsome man—a picture of manly intelligence and many strength. She would rather have seen him dead than the beloved of her step-daughter. When his glance met hers, he bowed coldly, and his eye quickly looked beyond her.

He did not see how her hand wildly grasped at the folds of her silk gown, and how she bit her lips almost until the blood came.

His look sought only one—Lillian—and at last he found her, the center of a group of admiring girls. When she saw him coming, a deep crimson flush stole over her face and she went to him with all speed.

"Oh, how I want to speak to you, Victor," she whispered, and the look with which she accompanied these words showed him that she was in a state of excitement.

When he had withdrawn with her to a quiet corner, he gently took her hand. He saw she was fighting with her tears.

"Be calm, dear," he prayed, "think of the many curious eyes about you; are they to know what you are going through?"

Bravely she held back the tears and only the convulsive pressure of her hand still spoke of the storm within her.

"Victor," she said, "I can beaer it no longer—it will kill me. You poor fellow—I know it is not right for me to make things harder for you, but I must pour out my heart to someone, and dear, you are that one."

"Speak Lillian," he urged, "tell me all that troubles you. Have we not promised to bear joy and sorrow together?"

Fondly she looked up at him.

"I thank God I have you," she breathed. "You are my only thought, Victor, my only hope. Oh, if you knew what they have been doing to me. Never before has my step-mother been so hard as in these last few weeks

"She says my engagement to Roger Hawkins will be announced in a few days, and if I do not submit voluntarily, she will find ways and means to force me. First of all, she would take me with her away from here so as to deprive us of any opportunity to see each other.

"Mr. Hawkins, however, would accompany us on our travels, as my intended. In this way she hopes to break my will. There is no doubt that she actually intends to carry out these plans as she is already making

preparations to travel. Oh, Victor, if she separates us I fear I will not survive it!"

"She is capable of anything," almost groaned Talbot. "She is mad from jealousy!"

"Jealousy?" The two beautiful eyes looked into his in childlike wonder and amazement. The delicate features suddenly paled, and all at once there showed full comprehension of his meaning.

Victor was startled.

Unthinkingly, he had betrayed to Lillian what he had intended should forever be unknown to her. Now she knew her step-mother's motives for all that had gone before.

"I should have guessed it," murmured the young girl weakly. "Now I understand everything. She loves you and you—rejected her love. That must hurt; she suffers more than I. I have your love and that makes me happy.

"Now the riddle of her objections to our marriage is solved; that is why she wants to keep us from one another.

"Oh, Victor, I almost feel sorry for her—it must be terrible to love without being loved in return!"

The swish of silken skirts made them look about hastily. Mrs. Crawford was just passing. Her piercing glance fell on Lillian—her face was white—she had overheard Lillian's words.

The latter looked after her much disturbed.

"She hates me—yes, she must hate me. But why not; I too would hate anyone who would rob me of your love, Victor," whispered Lillian.

"And what will become of us if she takes me away, and I cannot even write you? She will watch me very closely."

Victor Talbot was downcast. He could think of

no expedient—saw no hope. It was torture to him to see his love powerless in the hands of the spiteful woman —her stepmother.

"God only knows what will happen," he answered. "No one can stop her from traveling. I was not prepared for this blow. Oh, what a cad this Hawkins must be!

"Although he knows you cannot endure him — that you belong to me—he makes common cause with your step-mother and is a party to her attempts to force you to marry him. Oh, if I could but pay him back for all this!"

The ipulsive words caused some of the gentlemen who were passing to turn and they saw his angry countenance and clenched hands.

Talbot at once regained his composure. Tenderly he looked into the face of his love.

"There is one thing she cannot take from us, Lillian—our love," he said. "We will be courageous. We must win in the end, and perhaps I can manage to think out a plan which will keep you home.

"Don't be so hopeless, dear, this is not the worst that could have happened. We have faith in each other, and our love will repel all of her attacks."

Her face brightened perceptibly.

His love made her so happy, so rich—in spite of all she had to contend with. She was about to answer him when Roger Hawkins approached and bowed to her.

"Your mother has asked me to look for you; Mrs. Hunt is anxious to make your acquaintance," he said, offering her his arm.

Lillian made a motion as if to decline, but her reason quickly told her that, in her passion, Mrs. Crawford would be likely to make a scene if she refused to obey.

There was no question in her mind that this request was merely an artifice to break up her talk with

Talbot. Nodding to Victor she left him but without taking Hawkins' arm.

Talbot followed them slowly. He was offended that Hawkins had not noticed him — not even greeted him.

From a distance he observed that Lillian was introduced to Mrs. Hunt and conversed with her, and also that Hawkins joined in the conversation in such a manner as to give am impression of intimate relations with Lillian.

The blood raced madly in his veins. Nothing would have pleased him better than an opportunity to demand an explanation from Hawkins.

Seeing that he could not rejoin Lillian for the present, Talbot entered the smoking room where a number of men stood in groups passing the time.

In one of these groups, he recognized some friends.

He joined them and was heartily greeted. Time passed quickly in their company, but at last he left them to return to the ball-room. As he approached the door, he saw Hawkins whose face was flushed with wine, coming in his direction.

Talbot had just reached the threshold of the rather narrow doorway. As if he did not see him, Hawkins rushed in, pushing Victor aside.

"Mr. Hawkins, you owe me an apology," said he quietly.

With a quick, jeering laugh, Hawkins answered.

"An apology? I don't know why! Why didn't you look out, it was your own fault if I ran into you—you could have stepped aside."

Roger Hawkins was walking up close to Victor now, a fight seemed imminent.

Continued in next number

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